

50 ^MILE ZOLA, NOVELIST AND
REFORMER

spending degree in letters, being a necessary passport for eventual admission into the recognised professions or the government service.

The result of Zola's attempt was singular. In his written examination he proved very successful, his name appearing second on the list; but in the ensuing *vivitwce* examination, after securing good marks in physics, chemistry, and natural history, fair ones in pure mathematics, algebra, and trigonometry, he collapsed in literature and modern languages. He post-dated Charlemagne's death by five hundred years, scandalised the examiner by a romantic interpretation of one of La Fontaine's fables, and virtually confessed his utter ignorance of German. Thus his mark was zero; and though, it would seem, the examiners in sciences interceded in his favour with the examiner in *belles lettres* the latter remained obdurate and would not modify the mark. Zola was therefore "sent back," for it was not allowable that a bachelor in sciences should be absolutely *nul en litterature**

Several years previously Alexandre Dumas *fih* had been "ploughed" for the very same reason. Two distinguished men of Zola's own generation, Alphonse Daudet and Fran^{ois} Copp^é, also failed to secure bachelors' degrees; yet, like

Zola himself, they became eminent writers. Of course it is impossible to found any valid argument for or against degrees on a few isolated instances. It may be doubted, perhaps, whether they are any great recommendation to the literary man who is a dramatist or a novelist or a poet. But Zola's literary aspirations did not enter into his scheme when he offered himself for examination; he merely wished

¹ Alexis, *I c.*, pp. 40, 41.